Open letter to Tariq Ramadan
by David Goodhart

Last week the Islamic scholar and reformer Tariq Ramadan argued in the Guardian for an end to calls on British Muslims to integrate. Here, Prospect editor David Goodhart replies

David Goodhart is the editor of Prospect

Dear Tariq,

I was disappointed by your piece in the Guardian on Monday 4th June. For what it's worth, I have spent quite a lot of time in the past year or two defending you from the many people in the British political class who are influenced by the predominant French-American view that you are a dangerous extremist (recently rehearsed, as you will know, by Paul Berman in the New Republic). Having heard you speak several times, and interviewed you in depth for Prospect, I concluded that whatever your former beliefs, you now thought that Muslims should embrace and integrate into western societies. You even seemed to be edging towards a non-literalist reading of the great texts of Islam. To the extent that you did prevaricate over reform--the famous moratorium on stoning for adulterers, for instance--I took this to be an example of your "realpolitik" belief that you would lose credibility with mainstream Muslims if you moved too far ahead of your people. As the grandson of the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, you are, after all, minor royalty in parts of the Muslim world.

Perhaps you have your "realpolitik" reasons too for repeating the grievance-seeking, responsibility-avoiding diatribe that I read in the Guardian--all too familiar from far less accomplished Muslim thinkers than yourself--claiming that all this Muslim extremism in Britain is someone else's fault, probably the British government's. But it is still nonsense. You come close to repeating the canard that Mohammad Sidique Khan was a well-integrated young British-Pakistani driven mad by Tony Blair's foreign policy. Well, I implore you to read the cover story in the latest issue of Prospect magazine by Shiv Malik. It describes how Khan, who had indeed been relatively well integrated as a youngster, became seduced by the temptation of extreme Muslim identity politics. There are two reasons why Muslim youth seem to be especially vulnerable. First, the acute generational conflict created by moving from traditional social and moral orders to a modern liberal society; second, the existence of various Islamist political-religious ideologies offering a total explanation of the world and the young Muslim's potentially heroic role in ushering in a new one. Khan had swapped his parents' traditionalist Islam for the "pure" Wahhabi faith in the mid-1990s, and by 1999 he was already seeking to perform violent jihad--many years before 9/11 or the Iraq war. (Of course, the latter did enrage him too, and it made Britain his target instead of Kashmir or Israel.)

To blame it all on British foreign policy and racism will simply not do. British Muslims are among the politically freest
and richest in the world, which is why so many more Muslims are desperate to come and live here. Do some Muslims do less well than the average on educational and employment outcomes? Yes, of course, especially those from poor countries with traditional outlooks such as Pakistanis and Bangladeshis. It is notable that many other ethnic minorities, including the more middle-class Muslims from India, do far better than British Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, and often far better than the white average. Is there some discrimination, racism even? Yes, but there is far less than in the past and less than most other countries in the world. Minorities are certainly far better treated here than they are in most of the Muslim world. The ideology of Islamophobia is a mixture of exaggeration (see Kenan Malik's work on this subject) and a sort of perverted utopianism that interprets the initial suspicion (and sometimes even hostility) towards strangers found in all cultures as proof of deep hatred of a particular religion. Offering equal citizenship to new migrants, Muslim or otherwise, in the form of political and legal equality is relatively simply. Offering "felt" equality takes longer. Britain has many structural flaws, and individual acts of unfairness or discrimination take place every day based on race and religion, and many other things too. In a narrow legalistic sense, Jews, Asians and blacks in Britain have more legal protection from discrimination than Muslims. But to assert that Britain is a kind of apartheid state where justice is "applied varyingly depending on whether one is black, Asian or Muslim" is such an absurd exaggeration that it undermines your credibility when you are pointing to real grievances.

And foreign policy? Britain in the post-cold war era, and especially under Tony Blair, has been running a more "interventionist" policy than was possible earlier. Some of those interventions--such as that in Sierra Leone, 70 per cent Muslim--have been relatively successful and popular. Others, especially that in Iraq, have been unsuccessful and much more controversial, splitting the country in two. But the idea that because an aspect of foreign policy is unpopular among several million citizens (the vast majority non-Muslims, by the way) it should be instantly abandoned reflects a misunderstanding of representative democracy. We don't do foreign policy by opinion poll, and nor do we (or should we) offer a veto to ethnic or religious groups. If Muslims want to change British policy on Iraq or anything else, they should join with the larger number of non-Muslims who are unhappy about British foreign policy in political parties and pressure groups. If they win the argument, over time foreign policy will change. But it requires patience, and accepting that however strong your feelings, the democratic political process works slowly and over the long term.

But in any case, the idea that British foreign policy has been run on an anti-Muslim agenda does not stand examination. In Bosnia and Kosovo (and Sierra Leone), Britain took military action on behalf of Muslims, in some cases against Christians. In Iraq, rightly or wrongly (and Prospect was opposed to Britain's role) we helped to remove a secular dictator, and we will leave behind a Muslim democracy of some kind. If there has been a disproportionate intervention in Muslim countries, it is mainly because those countries are disproportionately unstable and conflict-ridden. Of course, I am aware it is not seen like that in much of the Muslim world--where the typical hypocrisy and realpolitik of the west (relating to UN resolutions, Israel, oil, good dictators and bad dictators) always seems to bear down on Muslims. But the belief that it is all about Islam is an oddly self-regarding conceit, arising from the prickliness and defensiveness that many Muslims feel confronted with a stronger and more successful western world. And if British Muslims are so troubled by the loss of Muslim life, why did we hear so little about the greatest unnecessary loss of such life in recent times in the Iran-Iraq war? No, unfortunately, what moves many political Muslims is the loss of Muslim life that can in some way be construed as the fault of the west. Shouldn't you be using your influence to combat this anti-western, victim mentality among your fellow Muslims?

You say that the British Muslim reaction to 7/7 was "exemplary." Well, yes, the vast majority of British Muslims reacted perfectly sensibly--regretting the incident and condemning the terrorist action. But a significant minority--anything between 7 and 15 per cent according to opinion polls--sympathised with the action, and a staggering 25 per cent (according to another poll) think that the action was not undertaken by Muslims at all, and was instead part of some western anti-Muslim conspiracy. This should surely give any rational Muslim pause for thought. I would suggest that if anyone's reaction was exemplary, it was the British government's. In the days after the bombs, there was a constant stress from government and
media (including the often despised tabloid press) on how ordinary Muslims were not responsible for the atrocity. There was the hastily arranged symbolism of consultation with Muslim leaders--it was important to see them walking through the doors of Number 10. Later there were many complaints that this consultation was mishandled and that few of the "demands" of the Muslim leaders were met. But this turns a joint attempt to examine and combat extremism into a negotiation to force "concessions" out of a state and society presumed to be essentially hostile to Muslim interests. And, in any case, the British government has gone out of its way to try to meet various demands of Muslim bodies--both before and after 7/7--whether over Muslim schools, religious hatred legislation or Muslim representation in parliament and elsewhere. Do you honestly believe, as your article implies, that the British state is hostile to Muslim interests?

In recent months, the government has changed its attitude to some of the leading Muslim bodies such as the MCB, which it no longer thinks is part of the solution. I do not know the thinking behind this decision, but reading the history of Khan's radicalisation it is clearly the case that the older generation--which mainly run organisations like the MCB--have no real idea what is going on among the youth, often make the alienation problem worse, and sometimes express a visceral hostility to the west in general and Britain in particular. They often identify far more with co-religionists in other countries than with fellow British citizens, and see everything through an ethnic or religious prism--whether expressed in the language of traditional Islam or modern political Islamism, or an odd hybrid of the two.

You, I thought, were different. You were modern, confident, educated, in favour of Muslim integration against religious and ethnic balkanisation. You were favoured by the British government because, it seemed, you could transcend the often beleaguered, Muslim worldview. That worldview sees nothing but grievance and oppression, even for British Muslims like Mohammad Sidique Khan who enjoyed all the freedoms of a rich western society (to marry for love, to go to university, to never worry where his next meal was coming from or how he would pay for healthcare). It is also a worldview which sees the murder of 52 innocents two years ago in the name of Islam not as an opportunity to take a long, hard look at the pathologies inside some sections of British Muslim society but, rather, another opportunity to blame the government and complain about Islamophobia. Your Guardian piece suggests I was wrong about you--it is a depressingly typical expression of that beleaguered, paranoid worldview. Reassure me that it's all some complicated piece of political manoeuvring and that the real Tariq Ramadan is the one who wrote, also in the Guardian in July 2005, that British Muslims "should refuse simplistic discourses, promote critical and self-critical understanding and get out from their intellectual, religious and social ghettos."

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